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**Brown vs. Board: 50 years later**

**Where we live fuels a divide**

By Johnathon E. Briggs

There was a time when Walter Sondheim Jr. held fast to the notion that racially desegregated schools would give way to a racially integrated society. That was 1954. He admits now that he "should have known better."  
  
Sondheim was president of the Baltimore school board a half-century ago when in its Brown vs. Board of Education decision the U.S. Supreme Court found the racial segregation practiced within the public schools of 21 states to be unconstitutional. He moved quickly to comply and went about the thorny task of readying city schools for both black and white children by fall.  
  
"I thought, and so did other people, that we had the problem solved, that as soon as black and white kids went to school together they would recognize that skin color didn't make any difference and that we'd grow up a new generation of people without racial prejudice," the venerable civic leader, now 95, recalls with 50 years of hindsight. "It's not what happened."  
  
The average white person in a metropolitan area, which includes city and suburban dwellers, lives in a neighborhood that is about 80 percent white (down from 88 percent in 1980) and 7 percent black, according to a 2002 analysis of Census Bureau data by the Lewis Mumford Center at the State University of New York at Albany.  
  
By comparison, the average black person lives in a neighborhood that is 33 percent white (up from 30 percent in 1980) and 51 percent black. In general, the analysis found that blacks, Hispanics and Asians lived in more integrated neighborhoods than did whites.  
  
Where we live matters 50 years after Brown, urban experts say, because racially segregated neighborhoods produce racially segregated neighborhood schools. And given the continued economic inequality between whites and minorities - a disparity Brown was never meant to remedy directly - such schools are also economically segregated with disproportionately high numbers of students from low-income families.  
  
"It's all tied together," says Columbia University law professor Jack Greenberg, 77, who argued several desegregation cases that were combined in Brown vs. Board. "You're going to have to have better education in order to have better income. You're going to have to have integration to have better education. All this talk about equalizing schools is a lot of garbage. The only equality is integration."  
  
The residential separateness occurs even though, when it comes to where we lay our heads, majorities of blacks, whites and Hispanics say they would rather live in a racially mixed neighborhood than surround themselves with only members of their own group, according to a Gallup poll conducted last year, one of many that suggest American platitudes and realities don't square up.  
  
Why haven't we moved closer together, as those such as Sondheim hoped?  
  
Indeed, many people are hesitant to call the separateness "segregation," pointing out that it is not sanctioned by law and claiming it largely reflects the personal preferences of those - of all races - with means and mobility. But the evidence suggests that prejudice plays a strong role: Blacks are more willing to live among whites than whites among blacks.  
  
When middle-class black families move to the suburbs, white families often leave. Randallstown, for example, was 70 percent white in 1990; it is now 72 percent black.  
  
The poorest families simply get left behind, creating concentrations of poverty that government housing programs have done little to alleviate. Today, two of every three African-Americans in the six-county Baltimore metropolitan area live in the city, according to an analysis of census data by Thomas Hylton, president of Pennsylvania-based Save Our Land, Save Our Towns Inc., which advocates for communities that are inclusive of all ages, races and incomes.  
  
In the 1950s when white flight was fueled by such attitudes, Sidney Hollander Jr. stayed put in Northwest Baltimore's Windsor Hills neighborhood and fought against unfair housing practices like the "blockbusting" tactics used by real estate brokers to scare whites into selling their homes as blacks arrived.  
  
Now his son, David, lives in the predominantly black neighborhood with his Chinese-American wife, Teri, and their 8-year-old daughter, Clara. Like his father, David believes in integration but says that Baltimore will remain racially segregated until it rebounds from what fueled white and, later, black middle-class flight: crime, poor performing schools and deteriorating infrastructure.  
  
"If you deal with schools, economic development and what makes the city attractive, the integration will flow," says Hollander, 62, acting registrar at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., head of Afro-American studies at Harvard University, says many of the premises of the Brown vs. Board brief - that black culture was negative, that separate implicitly meant unequal, that blacks wanted to assimilate - were flawed.  
  
"Black culture is very old in this country; it's as old as blacks in America, and it turns out that black people didn't want to stop going to predominantly black churches, they didn't want to stop eating soul food; and it wasn't that they wanted to live with white people, they just didn't want to live with poor people," Gates explains, speaking of blacks with mobility. "They wanted to live with their class counterparts."  
  
Brown failed to distinguish between enforced segregation and willing association, he says.  
  
But studies show that discrimination in real estate and mortgage lending practices - not personal choice - affects housing options: Middle-class blacks live in less affluent and desirable neighborhoods than their white counterparts.